

New Electorate Study

Voters Choice Act:

How Did Voters Experience the New Reform in 2018?

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RESEARCH QUESTIONS

2018 saw the implementation of the Voter's Choice Act (VCA) in the adopting counties of Madera, Napa, Nevada, Sacramento, and San Mateo. How did eligible voters experience the Voter's Choice Act in its first election cycle? How satisfied were voters with casting their ballot? We address these questions by conducting a survey after the 2018 Primary Election of Californians eligible to vote, and comparing their perspectives in VCA counties with those voters from counties that did not adopt the VCA in 2018. This brief provides highlights from that analysis.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

1. Voters in VCA counties traveled a greater amount of time to cast their ballot—either by dropping it off or voting in person—than voters in counties that did not adopt the VCA.
2. Well over a third of eligible voters in VCA counties had heard nothing or a little of the new voting changes in their county, suggesting greater outreach efforts are needed to reach these voters.
3. A majority of eligible California voters (including non-registered voters), reported that their preferred way to cast a ballot was to either mail it or drop it off at a secured drop box.
4. A majority of California eligible voters cited voting in person at a polling place or elections office as the method of voting that provides them the most confidence that their ballot will be counted correctly in future elections.
5. Voters of color are experiencing the VCA and the voting process somewhat differently than the rest of the voting population in VCA counties.

BACKGROUND ON THE VOTER'S CHOICE ACT

In 2016, Governor Jerry Brown signed Senate Bill 450 into law, which allows California counties to choose to adopt a new voting model.¹ Known as the Voter's Choice Act (VCA), this law directs participating counties to mail every registered voter a vote-by-mail ballot which the voter can mail in (Los Angeles County is not required to mail every registered voter a ballot until 2024), drop off at a secure ballot box, or drop off at a newly established Vote Center. The VCA also provided more services to voters using the new Vote Centers. At a Vote Center, voters can now cast their ballots in person, drop off their VBM ballots, register to vote as late as election day through "conditional" voter registration, receive replacement ballots, use an accessible voting machine, and receive language assistance. Voters may vote at any Vote Center in their county up to ten days before Election Day.

The following counties have publicly announced that they will adopt the VCA for the 2020 election cycle: Amador, Butte, El Dorado, Fresno, Los Angeles, Mariposa, Orange, Santa Clara, Trinity and Tuolumne. In total, fifteen California counties will be conducting elections under the Voter's Choice Act in 2020—approximately half the state's current registered voter population.

RESEARCH APPROACH

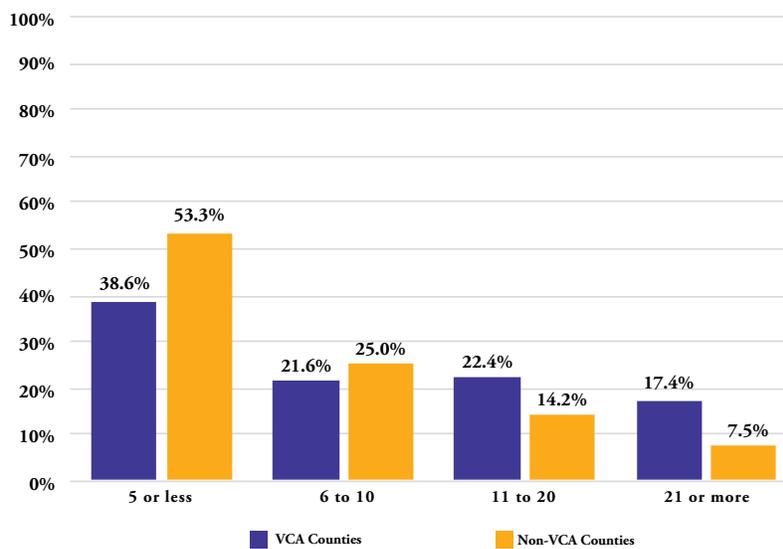
To understand how California voters are experiencing the VCA (or might do so in the future), our survey examines voters' travel times to cast their ballot and whether voters have heard of the VCA model in their county. We also examine a key factor that could influence the method of voting a voter chooses, the level of satisfaction that voters have with casting their ballots, and what aspects of voting they do not find satisfying. This brief presents highlights from this analysis.

When evaluating the level of satisfaction voters experience in casting their ballots, it is important to use caution in making direct causal attributions when comparing VCA and non-VCA counties. There can be a number of factors in an election, aside from implementing the VCA, that can potentially influence voters' responses on questions related to this topic.

We note here that the survey questions informing the analysis in this brief were a component of a larger survey designed to gain insight into the explanations voting-age citizens offer for not turning out to vote. Researchers participating in the New Electorate Study fielded a survey of Californians in the late summer and early fall of 2018. Respondents were recruited through Lucid Labs. The survey yielded 11,053 responses from voting-age citizens, 83% of whom reported being registered to vote. All respondents were asked a series of questions designed to capture, directly and indirectly, some features of the voting process that might lead an eligible person to abstain from voting.

SECTION 1. HOW DID ELIGIBLE VOTERS EXPERIENCE THE VOTER'S CHOICE ACT?

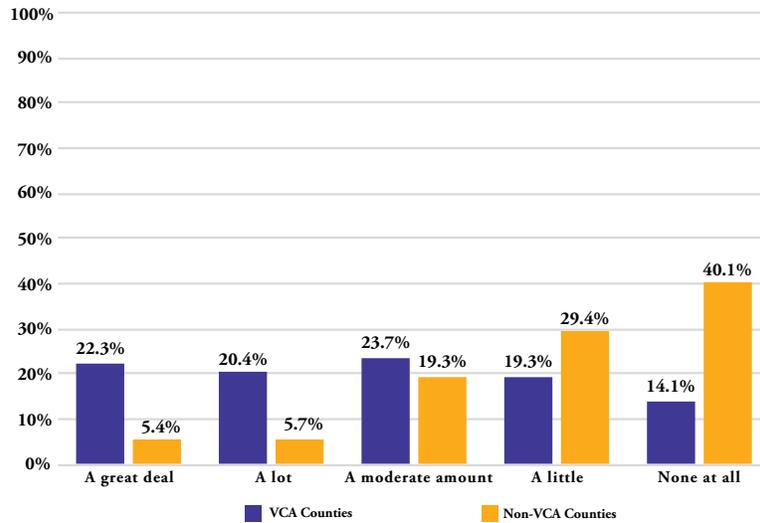
Figure 1: How many minutes did you travel to either drop off your ballot or vote in person?



A key change that the VCA brings to voters in adopting counties is the replacement of neighborhood polling places with less numerous Vote Centers. Since the VCA became law, many voter advocacy groups have been concerned that fewer locations to vote in person could mean longer travel times, possibly making access difficult for some voters. Our analysis found that a greater percentage of those who voted in-person or dropped off their ballot (whether in a drop box or elections office) in the 2018 Primary traveled a longer amount of time to cast their ballot than did voters in non-VCA adopting counties. From Figure 1 we can see that just over 17% of VCA county voters traveled more than 20 minutes to drop off their ballot or vote in person compared to 7.5% of non-VCA county voters.

When we examined these data for VCA counties by race and ethnicity, we found a smaller percentage (29.6%) of Latino voters compared to the total voter population traveled five minutes or less to vote in person or to drop off their ballot. Conversely, a greater share of Latino voters traveled 11 to 20 minutes (26.2%) or more than 20 minutes (19.5%) to cast their vote. In contrast, a greater share of African American voters traveled five minutes or less (43.2%) to vote. More of both African-American (18.1%) and Asian-American (20.7%) voters traveled longer than 20 minutes than did the total eligible population to drop off their ballot or vote in person.

Figure 2: How much would you say you've heard about the changes to the voting system in CA?

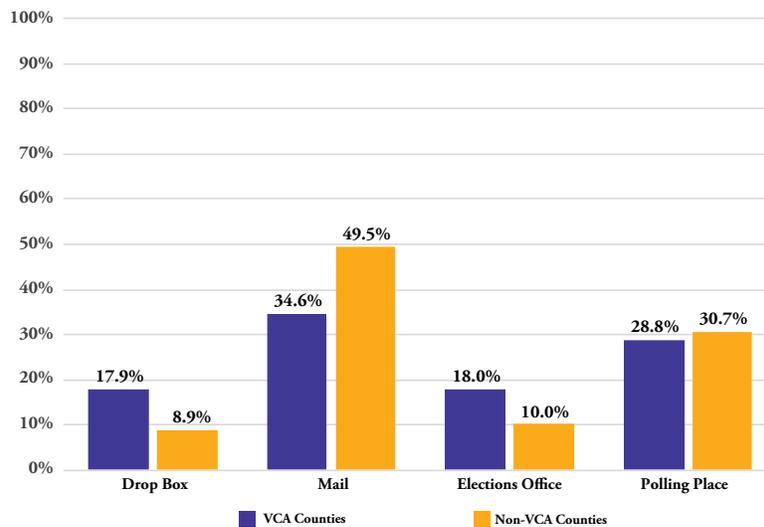


Nearly 43% of eligible voters (including non-registered voters) from VCA counties have heard “a great deal” or “a lot” about the new voting system in their county (Figure 2). However, 33.4% of VCA county eligible voters had heard nothing or little of the new voting changes despite their county implementing the VCA in the 2018 Primary Election.

Latino eligible voters in VCA counties reported a greater awareness of the new voting system than the total eligible population in the same counties. Just over 50% of Latino eligible voters heard a great deal or a lot about the new voting system. However, a smaller share of Asian-American eligible voters (35.6%) heard a great deal or a lot, while 20.7% heard nothing at all.

Survey respondents were given a description of the VCA immediately prior to answering this question. We note here that having heard about the new model does not necessarily mean that a respondent is aware of and understands all the voting options available to them. Further, it could be expected that a higher number of non-VCA county voters are not aware of voting changes since their counties did not implement the VCA, nor conduct outreach on this new voting model.

Figure 3: Thinking ahead to future elections, what would be your most preferred way to cast a ballot?



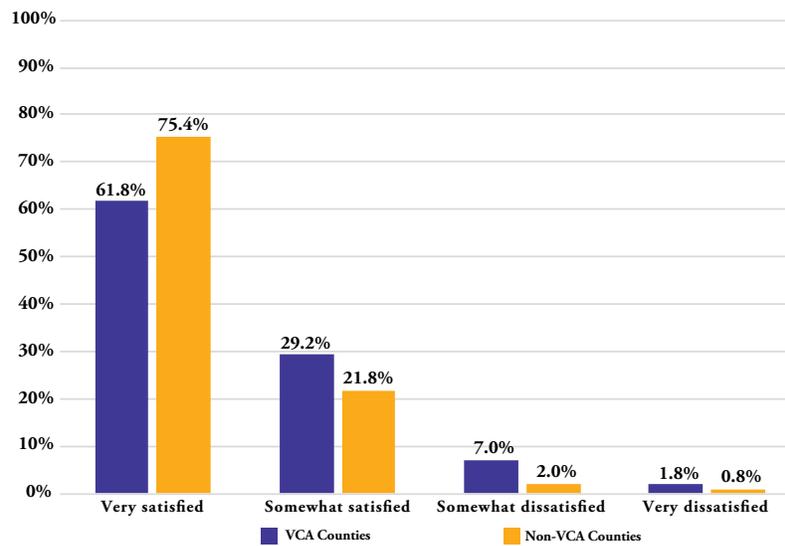
A majority of eligible California voters (including non-registered voters), reported that their preferred way to cast a ballot was to either mail it or drop it off at a secured drop box (Figure 3). However, this preference was higher in non-VCA counties. Conversely, nearly 47% of eligible voters in VCA counties prefer voting in person, either at an elections office or a traditional polling place, compared with 40.7% in non-VCA counties.

When looking at the data for VCA counties, there are some key differences by race and ethnicity. A smaller percentage of Latino (29.9%) and African-American (30.8%) eligible voters than the total eligible population reported that voting by mail was their preferred method to cast their ballot. Just over 40% of Asian-American eligible voters also preferred voting by mail.

It should be noted that considering the high percentage of eligible voters who are not yet aware of the VCA-related changes, many of the voters citing a preference for traditional polling places might not be able to make a distinction between Vote Centers and polling places.

SECTION 2. HOW SATISFIED ARE VOTERS WITH CASTING THEIR BALLOT?

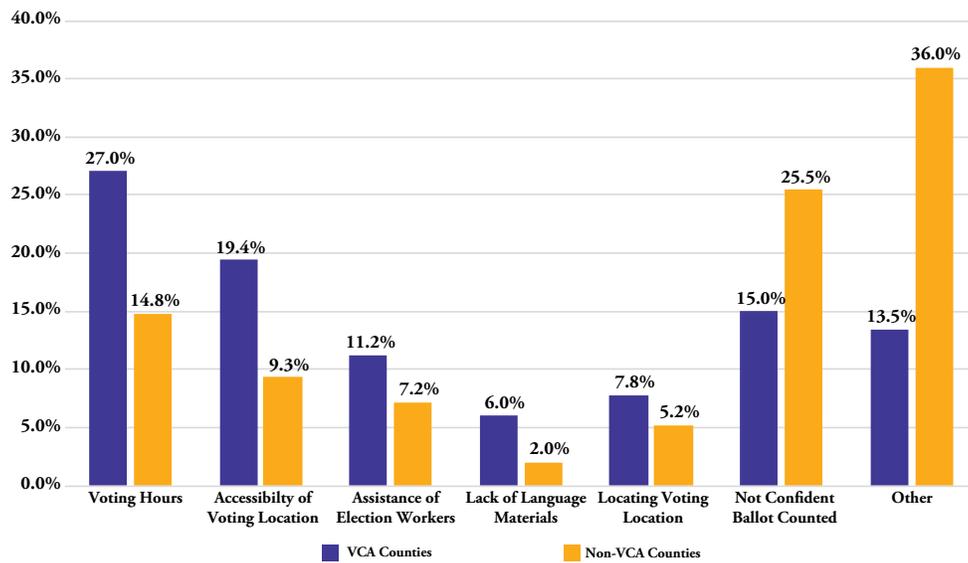
Figure 4: How satisfied were you with the process of casting your ballot?



Over 90% of 2018 Primary voters were either somewhat or very satisfied with the process of casting their ballot, although levels of satisfaction were somewhat lower in VCA counties compared with non-VCA counties. Figure 4 shows that almost 9% of voters in VCA counties were somewhat or very dissatisfied with their voting process, while only about 3% were in the rest of the state.

With this question, Latino Primary voters differ from other voters to a large degree. Just over 15% of Latino voters in VCA counties reported they were very or somewhat dissatisfied with the process of casting their ballot in the 2018 Primary.

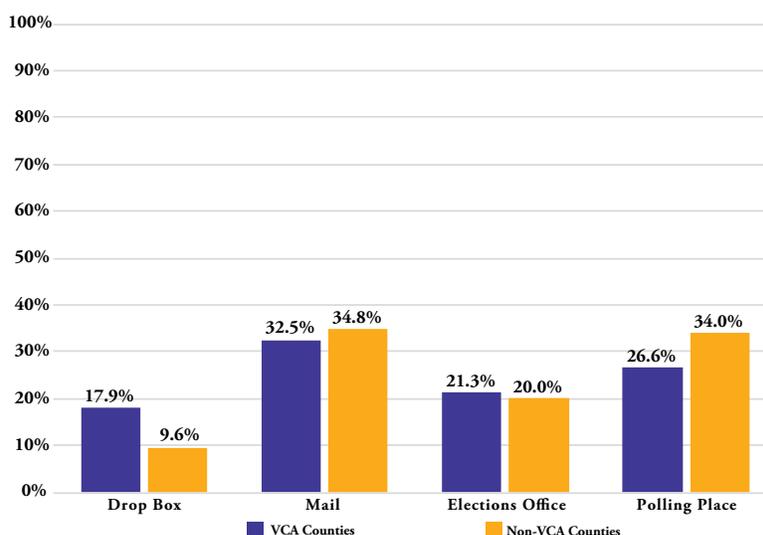
Figure 5: What aspect of the process of casting your ballot did not satisfy you?



In the 2018 Primary, there were considerable differences in aspects of the voting process that did not satisfy voters in VCA counties compared to non-VCA counties. Figure 5 shows that over a quarter of VCA county voters found that the hours available for in-person voting were not satisfying. Just over 19% were dissatisfied with the accessibility of in-person voting locations, while another 15% were not confident their ballot would be counted correctly and 11.2% were not satisfied with the assistance of election workers. Fewer voters in non-VCA counties cite hours (14.8%), assistance (7.2%), and accessibility (9.3%) as concerns, although a much greater share (25.5%) were not confident their ballot will be counted correctly.

In VCA counties, more Latino, African-American and Asian-American 2018 Primary voters cited being dissatisfied with the accessibility of in-person voting locations and with the assistance of election workers than the total population of Primary voters in these counties. Just over 37% of Latino voters also indicated dissatisfaction with the hours available for in-person voting.

Figure 6: Thinking ahead to future elections: what would give you the most confidence that your ballot would be counted correctly?



A majority of California eligible voters (whether or not they express dissatisfaction in casting their ballot) cited voting in person at a traditional polling place or an elections office as the method of voting that provides them with the most confidence that their ballot will be counted correctly in future elections. This percentage is somewhat lower for eligible voters in VCA counties alone. Figure 6 shows that another 32.5% of VCA county eligible voters and 34.8% of non-VCA eligible voters felt the most confident that their ballots would be counted correctly when sending their ballot through the mail. Eligible voters have the lowest levels of confidence when using drop boxes.

CONCLUSION

Our analysis found some noteworthy differences in how voters in VCA counties are experiencing the voting process compared to voters in the rest of the state. Voters in VCA counties traveled a longer amount of time to cast their ballot in the 2018 Primary Election—either by dropping it off or voting in person—than voters in counties that did not adopt the VCA. Our finding that well over a third of eligible voters in VCA counties had heard very little to nothing about the new voting changes in their county suggests a need for greater efforts toward voter outreach and education, along with resources and funding to support those efforts.

We also found that, for many eligible voters in both VCA and non-VCA counties, confidence in whether their ballot is counted correctly can be the most important factor in their level of satisfaction in voting. A majority of California eligible voters cite voting in person at a traditional polling place or an elections office as the method of voting that provides them the most confidence that their ballot will be counted correctly in future elections, although these percentages are somewhat lower for VCA counties.

Lastly, we found sizable differences in nearly all the study's research questions by race and ethnicity, meaning that many voters of color are experiencing the VCA and the voting process differently than the rest of the voting population. In our upcoming report, we will provide a more detailed examination of the variation in these findings by race, ethnicity and age, as well as explore the experiences of first-time voters with the VCA.

REFERENCES

- 1 For more information on the Voter's Choice Act (California Senate Bill 450), see: http://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=201520160SB450

We would like to thank Kim Alexander for her feedback on this research. All errors and omissions remain the responsibility of the authors.